

"BLIND BOONE" COULD PLAY ANY COMPOSITION HE

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JOHAN W. BOONE was a Negro, born under none too auspicious circumstances in a militia camp during the Civil War. At the age of six he lost his sight but at the same time, by some apparently miraculous act of compensation, his other faculties became proportionately sharpened. When he died the other day at Warrensburg, Missouri, the home of his boyhood, he left behind him the record of an unique accomplishment in a field already traversed by the first rank of human genius.

He was a piano-playing marvel. By virtue of an inborn mimetic gift, plus a patiently cultivated esthetic sense, he could reproduce the most difficult piano compositions with flawless technique and a gratifying emotional coloring. Under the name of "Blind Boone" he traveled all over the earth giving concerts. He made and lost a small fortune but he never lost a friend. No one ever heard him make a bitter or cynical remark and he was apparently incapable of doing an unkind act.

Unlike that other blind prodigy of his race, "Blind Tom," Boone had a fully developed mentality and a philosophic grasp of the world as he knew it. Life to him was not a terrifying excursion in the dark. It was an experience made up of pleasant sounds and friendly touches.

BLIND BOONE'S mother was a cook for the soldiery and his father a bugler in the Seventh Missouri Militia when he was born at Miami, in Saline County. After the war the family settled down in Warrensburg.

If the boy's mother and father had any thoughts of making him a musician they were undoubtedly dispelled when he suffered an attack of brain fever and lost his sight. The only practical thing they could do was to have him taught a trade. With that end in view he was sent to the St. Louis School for the Blind and was told that with enough patience he could acquire enough mechanical proficiency to become a broom-maker.

By then, though, the boy had all sorts of inarticulate longings and an obvious musical gift. As a ragged urchin around Warrensburg he had wandered about the streets making tunes on a tin whistle. Sometimes they were original but often they were the popular airs of the day, any one



John W. Boone,
seated, and
his manager,
John Lang.

Life and Career of a Famous Missouri
Negro Piano Prodigy.

of which he could reproduce after one hearing. The white people of the town were fond of the lad, both because of his cheerful disposition and his music-making abilities. They would often call him in from the streets, give him cakes and jam and talk to him. On one occasion he touched a piano for the first time.

As he afterward described it, that moment was one shot through with magnificent and determining emotions. He was never able to forget the sensations that he felt when the vibrations from the instrument ran through his fingers and arms and the sound re-echoed in his ears. They occurred to him often after he got to St. Louis. Finally he could stand the broom-making apprenticeship no longer and ran away from the school, becoming a derelict in the town.

Feeling his way around with a hickory cane he wandered into a musical institution and asked to play the piano. He played for a long time—but, while the astonished pupil who had admitted him left the room to tell her instructors about the strange and gifted Negro urchin, he became self-conscious and left.

Later he met up with a conductor of a railroad train who agreed to take him back to Warrensburg. Back in his home town

he organized a company of three, composed of himself and two companions of slight musical gifts but with the wanderlust. These three started out to become modern troubadours but after knocking around Missouri and enduring many hardships, they were forced to return to Warrensburg where they would at least be certain of eating fairly regularly.

BUT Blind Boone was by no means cured of his desire to become a great musician and to travel. A few years later, when he was a growing youth, he again took to the road but under better circumstances this time. He arranged dates at churches and country schools and gave a number of piano concerts.

While at Fayette, Missouri, his reputation reached the ears of John Lang, a Negro contractor of Columbia. Lang was a prominent member of the Second Baptist Church. It was near Christmas and the church was planning an enter-

tainment. Lang went to Fayette and brought Boone to Columbia with him as the feature attraction of the entertainment.

Impressed by the boy's abilities—Boone was then seventeen—Lang broached the idea of their entering a partnership, Lang to handle all the business of an extended road tour. Boone readily agreed but, since it involved the necessity of Lang's giving up a profitable business in Columbia for what seemed a dubious gamble, Lang's friends, black and white, advised him against it. But he stuck to the plan and as a preliminary step had a professor from a girl's college at Columbia take Boone in and gave him a few months' technical instructions. It was during that period of instruction that Boone came in contact with the compositions of the masters of the piano. After that experience Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or some composer of approximately equal rank was always represented in Boone's programs.

He assimilated these compositions with the same ease as the more popular ones. After one or two hearings he could always reproduce the most difficult cadenza or the most involved series of chords. From his instructor he picked up a few valuable hints on phrasing and pedalling. He then fared forth to conquer his public.

The partnership between the two Negroes lasted more than forty years and made both Lang and Blind Boone wealthy.

Lang died in Kansas City about eight years ago. His estate was valued at \$110,000.

Before his death Lang wrote a biography of Blind Boone. Lang knew Boone better than anyone else and after forty years of association he was able to pay him a high tribute.

"I have known Boone since he was a boy and I can truthfully say that he has not an enemy in the world. As an entertainer I believe him to be the greatest man living today. This is a broad statement but we can prove this by facts. He has been on the road over forty years and has given more piano recitals than any other living man. He has never been in a town or city that he did not have a return date to a paying business.

"I am often asked many questions about Boone, such as these: 'How did Boone lose his sight?' 'How long has he been on the road?' 'How many miles do you suppose he has traveled?' 'How many different beds has he slept in?' 'How many dollars has the company handled?' 'How much has he raised for churches and charity?' 'How much is he worth and where is his home?' and many others.

"OUR record shows," continues Lang, "a continuous period of thirty-nine years of ten months each and six concerts a week, would make 8650 concerts that he has given.

"The distance we traveled would average 20 miles a day, or 216,000 miles traveled while we slept in 8250 beds.

"We paid to churches, halls and charity an average of \$25 a day, or a total of \$216,000." (Boone later estimated that churches and charity had profited a half million dollars from his concerts.)

"I am asked many times," continues Lang in his biography, "How does Boone keep so well posted on music? Ever since there have been self-playing pianos Boone has had one. He has at last succeeded in securing a Cecilia that plays 88 notes. He also has a large musical library—Beethoven's works, Liszt's, Chopin's and all of the old mas-

ters. He puts in day and night with these. He masters the most difficult pieces in a few hours and he can produce any ordinary piece of music after hearing it played once. Boone has had more eminent artists play for him than any living man and he never forgets the voice or the shake of a hand. A

"Boone never sulks as did his predecessor, Blind Tom, nor does he allow anyone around him to sulk. His favorite saying is: 'Just as you live, just so you die.' He says time is too short and sweet to please the devil for even one moment. He is always charitable and many times he has authorized me when I see a deserving person in need to assist that person in his name."

BLIND Boone wrote many compositions, the most famous of which was his "Marshfield Tornado." His three last compositions were: "The Last Dream Waltz," "Love Feast," a waltz, and "I Can Weep," a spiritual. Among his instrumental compositions are: "The Spring," "Echoes of the Forest" and "Humming Bird." His transcriptions with variations include "Nearer, My God, to Thee," "My Old Kentucky Home," "Old Folks at Home," "Nicodemus," "Melodies de Negress."

Blind Boone closed his 47th annual tour in Virdin, Ill., May 31, 1927. His career took him over Europe twice and to all sections of the United States and Canada five times. He retired because of ill health to his home here. Retirement did not stop the flood of requests from every section of the country for concerts by the blind pianist. After a few at home and under the pressure of hundreds of letters weekly, he expressed a desire to return to the road and only the insistence of his physician kept him from doing so.